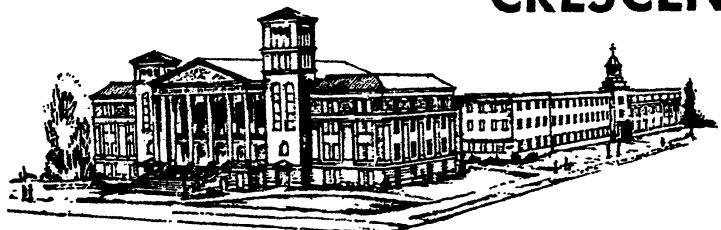


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS



"THE PERSONAL DEMAND OF CHRIST"

Sunday Morning, August 20, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Dr. John R. Claypool

From the moment Jesus began preaching in Galilee to the day He was crucified in Jerusalem, His message was the same. He proclaimed the dawning of the "new age," and called for a response of repentance and faith (Mark 1:14-15). The reality about which He spoke and which He Himself embodied was "the Kingdom of God." The requirements for entry were the same for everyone. Men were to "deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). Whatever men cherished the most, they must set it aside and thereafter "seek...first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). From first to last, His affirmation and demand never changed; what he said to and asked of each He said to and asked of all.

Yet within this unswerving consistency there was rich diversity. Jesus did not alter the structure, but He did personalize His message according to individual need. Just as a physician seeks to restore health to all his patients but does not always prescribe the same medicine, so the Great Physician of souls adapted His remedy to the specific situation. And we can learn a great deal about the Gospel if we will listen to this personalized witnessing. I invite you this morning to fall in step behind this One and walk with Him through the dusty ways of Palestine, seeing how He takes the central demand of Christianity and adapts it to different individuals.

The first interview we shall observe is with a man by the name of Nicodemus (John 3:1-2). He was a high ranking official in Jewish religious circles. A learned teacher of the Law, he was undoubtedly highly respected in Jerusalem. The key to understanding him is found in the one fact John's Gospel says about him - he was a member of the group called the Pharisees. These men were known for their zealous loyalty to the traditions of their fathers. They were quite proud of their racial heritage. Undoubtedly if you had questioned Nicodemus about the most treasured aspect of his life, he would have answered: "My Hebrew birth! I am a descendent of Abraham, a member of the chosen race of God." This fact was the central pivot of his life, the real basis of his religious commitment. And to this man - who gave pre-eminence to his physical birth - Jesus phrased His demand in this way: "Ye must be born again" (John 4:7). Jesus was saying in essence: "You must stop depending on your racial heritage, and give first place in your life to God. You must shift your standard of values, you must change your ultimate authority. You must begin a new kind of life that centers in being born of God instead of being born a Jew." This is a magnificent and profound analogy; it means that for the new life of the Kingdom there must be a new creature. Just as physical birth makes life in this world possible, so a spiritual birth, wrought by the mystery of God's creative power, is prerequisite to life in the Gospel. The Christian faith has been immeasurably enriched and illuminated by this concept, but it originated for a man to whom physical birth was all-important. Because of his particular nature, the demand of the Gospel took this form for Nicodemus.

The next person we shall observe is a woman from the village of Sychar in Samaria (John 4:1-30). Here is one who is altogether different, so the words of Jesus are completely changed. He does not say to her: "Ye must be born again"; rather He says: "What you need is to drink of living water" (John 4:10). As we look closely at this one, the reason for the use of this concept is clear. This woman has made physical satisfaction the end of life. Later on in the conversation it came out that she had had five husbands and had not even bothered to marry the man with whom she now lived. The very fact that she had come to the well at such an odd hour of noon implies that she was an outcast with the respectable community. Quite obviously this was "a woman of the streets," and physical pleasure had been for her the ultimate value. To her situation Jesus said in essence: "You must redirect the passion of your life. You must turn your craving to the righteousness of God, and obey that which will bring you lasting satisfaction." Here again we have an intriguing insight into the Gospel. It is a power that can fulfill our deepest needs. Instead of the frustrating pattern of physical life - sensation and then emptiness, satisfaction and then longing - here is everlasting peace. Like a well of water that forever springs fresh, like satisfaction that does not leave but remains forever, this is life with God as He is known in Jesus Christ. It is for Him we were made, and only in Him can we fully realize our true natures. This truth streams forth from the idea of "living water," but it all began in relation to a woman who needed to substitute longing for God in the place of longing for physical pleasure.

Our third encounter involves a man whose name we do not know. He is designated by popular usage as "the rich young ruler" (Mark 10:17-22). He came to Jesus with eager anticipation, and inquired about the secret of eternal life. He had been faithful to the Law, and obedient to every outward demand of his religion. Jesus went to the heart of his condition with shocking abruptness. He said to him: "Go, sell what you have, give it to the poor, come, take up your cross, and follow me" (Mark 10:21). This passage has caused endless misunderstanding. Many ask: "Is this what it means to be a Christian? Is one required to sell all he has to inherit eternal life?" The Roman Church has built a whole structure of monasticism on this demand of poverty. To interpret this properly we must recall the basic thesis of this sermon: Jesus adapted the form of His demand to the individual need. We are told that this one "went away grieved, for he had great possessions" (Mark 10:22). Thus it was not his riches, but his absolute allegiance to them that constituted the fault. Just as with the others, Jesus demanded first place, and what birth had been to Nicodemus and satisfaction to the Samaritan woman, possessions were to this man. This accounts for the particular nature of this statement. It would be wrong to say this command applies to every person, but we cannot escape the fact that it does apply to all who have an idolatrous attitude toward riches. Unlike so many in our day, Jesus did not accommodate His principles in the face of wealth. As someone has said: "Jesus 'lost' his man but He 'saved' His message." He was no more hesitant to demand this of the young man than anything else that was ultimate in a person's life. The fearful absolutism of the call of Christ is nowhere set in more bold relief than in the words: "Go...sell...give...take up...follow!"

On and on we could go, illustrating the same point, but I hope by now it is clear. There is rich variety in the vocabulary of Christ, for His Gospel is a "many-splendored thing." But this diversity is caused by human individuality, not by variance in the Gospel. If He says "ye must be born again" to one and "go sell all your goods" to another, it does not mean that Jesus makes an arbitrary settlement with each one. Back of every expression is the same unyielding demand - that God in Christ become the ultimate force in all of life.

We have heard this idea so often that I fear its radical significance eludes us. Do you realize what I am saying? Whatever is most precious, whatever is most powerful, whatever motivates us to act as we do - these must be set aside and in their place put the living Christ. This is no child's play, no flippant act of the moment. This is an earth-shaking, life-shattering, absolute redirection. It means a new Center, a new Authority, a new Source of control. It is frightfully radically, unbelievably costly, indescribably absolute. But this is discipleship on Jesus' terms.

Because I do not know all of you well enough, I cannot say how Jesus would phrase His demand to you. But I do know what He will ask; He will ask you to take whatever is your "god," dethrone it, and let Him sit there. The forms may be infinitely diverse, but the content is always the same. Whatever you are like, it ultimately means "denying yourself and following Him!"